

# Lent in a bag 2022: the Jesus Tree

a visual and reflective journey through the weeks of  
Lent using John's Gospel.



Part 1: 1-20  
Ash Wednesday  
to Thursday  
24th March

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**Benefice of Wyre Forest West**

## Contents

Welcome .....	2
Daily Pattern .....	2
Day 1: Ash Wednesday - Jesus, the Word .....	3
Day 2 Thursday: The Baptism of Jesus .....	4
Day 3 Friday: Calling the Disciples .....	5
Day 4 Saturday: The Wedding at Cana .....	7
Day 5 Monday: The Cleansing of the Temple .....	8
Day 6 Tuesday: Nicodemus.....	9
Day 7 Wednesday: The Woman at the Well.....	10
Day 8 Thursday: The Official's Son.....	11
Day 9 Friday: Healing on the Sabbath.....	13
Day 10 Saturday: Loaves and Fish.....	14
Day 11 Monday: Walking on water .....	15
Day 12 Tuesday: Bread of life .....	16
Day 13 Wednesday: Living bread.....	17
Day 14 Thursday: Words of Eternal life .....	19
Day 15 Friday: Come to me.....	20
Day 16 Saturday: The woman caught in adultery.....	21
Day 17 Monday: Light of the world .....	22
Day 18 Tuesday: the man born blind .....	24
Day 19 Wednesday: The good shepherd .....	25
Day 20 Thursday: Jesus' Sheep? .....	26

## Acknowledgements

These Jesus Tree decorations created by Julia Quinn, 2022.

Patterns to create your own set of felt Jesus Tree decorations are available online, see Do Small Things with love ([www.etsy.com/shop/DoSmallThingsWLove](http://www.etsy.com/shop/DoSmallThingsWLove))

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# Welcome



Welcome to Lent in a bag 2022: the Jesus tree Jesus Tree; a visual and reflective journey through the weeks of Lent using John's Gospel.

A Jesus tree is a development of the Jesse tree. Originally this showed the ancestors of Jesus (as our family tree would) but now it is used as an Advent activity that reflects on the story of God and God's people. A Jesus tree takes this idea further, and focuses on Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection.

For each of the 40 days of Lent (which doesn't count Sundays) there is a decoration to colour, a short reading (and sometimes a link to a longer one), a reflection to think about, a short prayer and activity.

In addition to the materials in the bag, you will need scissors, ribbon or string and a Bible (You can read the stories online at sites such as [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com)). If you don't have a tree for your decorations, put together some sticks, hang the decorations on a ribbon, decorate a window or door; be as creative as you wish!

## Daily Pattern

<b>Pause</b>	<b>Light your candle and pause. Breath in and out and settle before God.</b>
<b>Read</b>	<b>Each day there is a passage from John's Gospel to read.</b>
<b>Reflect</b>	<b>Using the reflection given, what does this passage say to you today?</b>
<b>Pray</b>	<b>Using the given prayer or your own.</b>
<b>Respond</b>	<b>Each day has a suggested activity in response to the reflection.</b>
<b>Relax</b>	<b>Colour or create your own decoration for the day.</b>

## Day 1: Ash Wednesday - Jesus, the Word

*"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."*

*Read John 1: 1-18*

Today we start at the beginning of John's Gospel with the prologue; verses we usually hear around Christmas Day. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

This Ash Wednesday is the start of another church season where things aren't quite the same due to Coronavirus. After the last two years, perhaps we can better identify with the Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. Yet, despite this, we can still enter into the Lenten journey knowing that wherever we are, even if we do feel alone in the desert, God is with us. One of the acts suggested in the liturgy for today is that, as a part of our Lenten journey we read and meditate on God's holy word; something I hope that this Jesus tree will help us to do, as we travel together through John's Gospel.

Where better to begin than at the beginning? Here we read not just the word of God, but we read of the Word – Jesus. It is such a few weeks since Christmas that the Christmas story itself has had little time to fade in our minds. That story, woven together from Matthew and Luke is one of wonder and joy. Yet it is in these words from John that the true immensity of Christ's actions for us are described. The One who created the universe, who helped to form us in God's own image, didn't just look on from afar. Jesus, the living word became one of us. As we remember we are but dust, we also remember how God embraces and inhabits and becomes one with that dust.

He was born a tiny, vulnerable baby and learned to walk and talk, just as we do. Imagine Jesus, for whom the cold, immense, vacuum of space was a canvas, experiencing human touch, taste, warmth and cold, pain and happiness, tiredness and joy, friendship, betrayal and loneliness and even death. If we wonder if God can understand what we are living through, I believe the answer is yes. For us too, in difficult days, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.

As today we ponder our mistakes and missteps, we do so knowing how great is God's love for us. Can we bring all our sorrows and regrets before God, trusting in that immense love?



## Prayer

Loving Lord, living Word  
who created stars and planets  
and brought forth life in all its richness,  
we ask forgiveness for our wrongdoing.  
As we journey with you  
though these difficult and dark times,  
draw close to us through this Lenten season.  
May you be our light. Amen.

## Activity

Look around for ways in which  
the light shines for you today.  
Perhaps light a candle, write  
down your favourite verse from  
today's reading or express your  
thoughts through a drawing.

## Day 2 Thursday: The Baptism of Jesus

***"The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"***

Read John 1: 19-34

We jump forward in time to John the Baptist. It is a rather different perspective on the baptism of Jesus that that we read in Luke, our Gospel for this year.

### For Reflection

John's gospel is full of signs and wonders. As I came to read this passage about John the Baptist, I was very aware of how different it seemed from the story we hear in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Yes, we still have John baptising; preparing, getting people ready because God is doing something new, is still very much part of the story. But a passage that begins with, "Who are you?" focuses little on John the Baptist. It rapidly becomes all about Jesus and who he is; who John sees that he is – the Messiah, the baptiser with the Holy Spirit. We start to get some of the wonderful phrases that occur in John's gospel.



*"Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."*

John the Baptist testified that the Messiah was coming to a world that was unprepared, unsure how to judge who might be their longed-for saviour. He was sure he knew. The presence of the dove of the Holy Spirit, descending and resting on Jesus showed him all he needed. He saw his role as simple; to tell all who would listen that Christ was here amongst us. John the Baptist denied being anybody special. He even denied the title of prophet. He declared he was not even good enough to untie the Messiah's

sandals - a job for a servant or slave. Faithful, courageous, humility seems to sum up John the Baptist's character here; characteristics he shares with our servant King Jesus. He may not have considered himself important; yet 2000 years later we celebrate the role he played in announcing the beginning of Jesus' ministry amongst us. He taught us to turn and seek for God, knowing that our sins will be forgiven for no-one is unimportant to God.

Do you feel unimportant to God today, or valued as one Jesus came to love?

### **Prayer**

Loving Lord, Lamb of God,  
as we turn to you again  
we ask that we may know  
the love you have for us  
deep in our hearts, setting us aflame  
to share your love with others. Amen

### **Activity**

*Cup some water in your hands and think about your own baptism. Thank God for those who helped lead you to faith and those whose lives you have nurtured.*

## **Day 3 Friday: Calling the Disciples**

*"Come and see."*

*Read John 1: 35-51*

We learn of people coming to find out more about Jesus in today's reading. Let us come and see how God's Word speaks to us today.

As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" asks Nathanael.

"Come and see." is Philip's response. It may just be local rivalry; Nathanael was from Cana, the next village along from Nazareth (the 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of looking down one's nose and saying, "We're better than you").

There again, we all know of places people dismiss, where they don't want to live or visit; places that people don't want to admit they are from, because they fear judgement and mistreatment.

I wonder whether Nathanael followed Philip expecting his comments to be justified? If so, he was in for a shock. Jesus saw him and welcomed him with generous words.



It takes moments for Nathanael's doubts and scepticism to be overturned and for him to recognise Jesus as Son of God and King of Israel. The Messiah had arrived. For me, Nathanael's story shows someone who was hoping for and seeking God's promised Messiah, but had, perhaps, certain expectations in mind. Yet he was willing to "Come and see" and allow his own preconceptions to be challenged. When given the chance, he saw that this carpenter from an unimportant, poor village was something unexpected, someone greater than had seemed possible. Jesus' response to Nathanael's declaration of faith?

*"You haven't seen anything yet!"*

(The Message)

Nathanael hadn't – and as we shall read, this Messiah was probably far from the ideal he had in his mind when he made his declaration. Just imagine what he witnessed, what each of the disciples learned about God and Jesus. All they did was answer a simple call to *"Come and see"* and *"Follow me."*

Too often we and the world around us think we have God all worked out; safely contained in the box of our preconceived ideas. Today, let us ask God to help us set these aside so we may discover anew the wonder of a God who says *"Come and see; you haven't seen anything yet!"*

Does it feel like God is asking you to embrace endless wonder today, or a set of expectations?

### **Prayer**

Loving Lord,  
renew our sense of wonder  
and free us from unhelpful images of you  
and others.  
As we read your word  
and live in your world  
help us to "Come and see"  
where you are working in us and others  
to bring about  
healing, refreshment and new life. Amen

### **Activity**

*Find a map and/or images of places (in the world or close by) where people are disadvantaged and discriminated against. Create a collage or write a prayer and add the words "Come and See" as we remember that God wants us to see them as his children too.*

## Day 4 Saturday: The Wedding at Cana

*"the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."*

*Read John 2: 1-12*

Today we read the story of the first of Jesus' "Signs" at a wedding about to lapse into disaster. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### For Reflection

Here is God among us, joining in with the important celebrations of human life that mean so much to us, even today. Jesus (albeit reluctantly) steps up to ensure that the celebration of this couple's new life together doesn't descend into shame and embarrassment due to a lack of hospitality. The need (of which the bride and groom were probably totally unaware) was met; and with such abundance! Six jars full of water each holding between 20 to 30 gallons.

That's a minimum of 120 gallons of wine - or in bottle terms around 600 bottles of wine. God, in Jesus, doesn't do things by halves.

Yet it is a sign that is done quietly, behind the scenes, visible only to the servants and the disciples. We are let in on the secret, to learn from it. There is more here than just a dramatic miracle demonstrating Jesus' divinity. It's a sign of what Jesus has in store for all of us, the abundance of new life that he brings. It reminds us again that God is the source of all life, all good things.



Perhaps it also challenges us to use the resources we have received wisely, remembering God gifts them to us for everyone to share, as all shared in this bounty at the wedding.

What might we do today to embrace God's generosity?

### Prayer

Loving Lord,  
who rejoices in our celebrations  
and comforts us in our tragedies,  
we thank you for the gifts you bring us.  
We praise you for the beauties of this world  
whose resources we often take for granted.  
Help us to treasure what we have from you  
and share with all in generosity.  
Amen

#### Activity

*Look around you today for signs of new life that spring brings. Perhaps watch the birds or look for flowering bulbs. Make a note, a picture or take a photo to remind you of Jesus' promises.*

## Day 5 Monday: The Cleansing of the Temple

***“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”***

*Read John 2: 13-25*

Yesterday’s private miracle is a contrast to today’s very public spectacle in the temple. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

The temple complex of Jesus’ time may seem very different from our ideas of a place of worship. Full the noise and smells of animals; sheep bleating, the fluttering of doves’ wings as they tried to escape their cages.

Imagine the buzz of talk in the air, as people waited to change their corrupting Roman coins bearing the face of the hated Caesar into the Temple coins, so they could buy their sacrificial lamb.



Even though this is not our experience, we can tell that Jesus’ actions in clearing the Temple grounds are shocking and surprisingly violent. It seems even more so due to John’s positioning of this story as Jesus’ first public act. What a way for a nobody prophet from the back of beyond to introduce himself!

It is, however, an act that makes us ask questions; is this the right way to be worshipping God? Previously it many have been hard for us to imagine just how deeply Jesus’ actions hit at the heart of Jewish belief as the temple really did lie at the centre of their faith.

Yet over the last years, we have also lived through events that have deeply affected the ways we participate in, and understand, worshipping God. Our routine, honed through the centuries, has been overturned like the tables in the temple, as some of us attended limited services in buildings, whilst others sought God within their own walls. Yet, through all this, new ways of reaching out and worshipping together whilst apart, were found. Jesus came to bring God’s message anew and we have been rediscovering what that means for our worship today. He would pay the price for overturning and unsettling the way things were with his life; but, in his resurrection, the new life – and hope- he brings is freely offered to all people.

What is upsetting and overturning our lives today?

### **Prayer**

Loving Lord, many of us do not deal well with the shock and change that overturns our normal lives.

Comfort us, we pray.

Help us to see your hand at work and, through your Spirit, help us to worship you knowing you are dwelling within our very being, making us living temples. Amen

## Activity

*Hold a coin in your hands and imagine those coins spinning and scattering on the ground in the temple; a symbol of confusion and disruption.*

*Light a candle of hope and place the coin bathed in the light that Christ brings.*

## Day 6 Tuesday: Nicodemus

***“But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”***

*Read John 3: 1-21*

After the commotion in the temple, perhaps it is not surprising that the Pharisee Nicodemus came in the darkness to see Jesus. The quiet of the night, however, was also a good time to study the scriptures.

Throughout John’s Gospel, light and dark are used as a means of telling the story. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

Nicodemus was already a devout man. Not yet knowing all, he saw enough in Jesus to realise he came from God. One who sought to nurture his faith, he went to ask questions.

As far as Nicodemus could see, Jesus was telling him riddles that he could not solve. Born into God’s chosen people, why would rebirth be desirable? He was, indeed, in the darkness of misunderstanding. He took Jesus’ comments very literally; something we all too often do today and unfortunately, he couldn’t quite grasp the good news Jesus brought.

Yesterday’s and today’s readings have something that we can understand, having the benefit of knowing the whole story. Both allude to Jesus’ death and what it would bring. Yesterday we had a foretaste of the coming resurrection; the rebuilding of the temple in three days. Today, in the image of the bronze serpent (lifted up by Moses to save the lives of the Israelites) we see, projected forward, the long shadows of the cross and the light of eternal life it brings.

Here, the new life that Jesus brings is symbolised by new birth, a birth where the Holy Spirit’s work leads us from the darkness of unknowing into the light of a new dawn. A new purpose for our lives comes into focus. One where serving the loving God, who sent God’s only son to bring us eternal life is the reason for all that we do. There are times in our lives when we, like Nicodemus, don’t quite understand; we misinterpret God, or look for the literal truth. Are we aware that God wished to enlighten any dark and mistrustful places in our hearts?



For those wishing to read the whole Gospel of John, on some days I will be adding an additional reading.

**John 3: 22-36**

### Prayer

Lord of Light and Life,  
fill us with your Holy Spirit  
and renew the life within us.  
Help us to open our hearts to your truth  
and do your will  
in our lives and your world.  
Amen

### Activity

Reflect on the well-known words of John 3:16.

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

You may find listening to Stainer’s setting useful, or looking at a picture of the world or using a holding cross or rosary as you ponder these words.

## Day 7 Wednesday: The Woman at the Well

***“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”***

Read John 4:1-42

As the belief in Jesus increased, so did the mistrust. Jesus headed back to Galilee, taking the shortcut through Samaria; somewhere most Jews would try to avoid. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### For Reflection



It was hot, and Jesus was tired, hungry and thirsty. A woman comes to the well at the hottest part of the day and Jesus asks for a drink and gets a theological discussion! Let’s stop for a moment and acknowledge that this is one of the moments where we clearly see Jesus as fully God and fully human. Here is God resting, suffering from the normal effects of a long walk in the hot sun, yet able to know the woman’s life history, and needs, at a glance. He ends up explaining and offering the new life he brings – the living water - to someone most good Jews wouldn’t be seen with; notice the disciples’ astonishment when they returned. Here we see a woman acting as messenger, encouraging others to

come and find what she had found by chance. They did, and Jesus stayed with them, teaching them.

Too often in my part of the United Kingdom on the River Severn, we have had to deal with the effects of too much water. Rivers rising and overcoming the human-made barriers designed to keep people and property safe, causing great damage and disruption. It can be hard to imagine a life where water is a scarce, precious resource; our perspective may have become distorted and we can miss some of the symbology here. These people were spiritually thirsty – perhaps almost drought stricken. So much so that a woman had a conversation with a complete stranger at the well and then urged others to do so. Jesus saw this and stayed with them for two more days, teaching, assuaging that burning thirst that they had. I wonder what the disciples thought of that?

How are we feeling at the moment? Desperately thirsty for God’s living water, or just plain swamped with other things to notice our thirst?

### **Prayer**

Living Lord, we thank you for the gift of water essential to our lives, both physically and spiritually. In changing times, nurture us and help us to bring the water of life to those who need it. Amen

### **Activity**

*Fill a glass or small bowl with water; as you do, thank God for clean running water. Sit with the glass and think about the symbolism of living water. What does it mean to us? Interact with the water in some way; by drinking it, or watering a plant; something that demonstrates its’ power to bring life.*

## **Day 8 Thursday: The Official's Son**

***“Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your son will live.’ The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.”***

*Read John 4:43-54*

Today we head back to Cana, and a distraught father’s pleas lead to a second sign. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

Believing in the words Jesus spoke, or the amazing things he did and believing in Jesus are two different things. Here is Jesus’ second sign, a public event in the same town as the first. A high-status father comes to beg for the life of his son. It is unclear exactly who he is, but many believe that then man was not a Jew, but a gentile.

One thing we do know for sure, he was desperate and had no time for religious discourse about signs:

*'Sir, come down before my little boy dies.'*

That's heart-rending. Jesus' response seems almost dismissive at first glance. Yet what more was actually needed from the Messiah who brings new life?

So often John's gospel works on many levels. We have the same pattern of behaviour here as at the wedding: a request is seemingly rebuffed, yet the person asking will not give up. They then act obediently, doing the task given, and a miracle, a sign, occurs. We can analyse the use of location, of language, of patterns; but it all comes down to people asking and acknowledging Jesus' true identity; everything points to God. Here Jesus heals at a word and the word is 'live'. Miles away, at that very moment, that precious little boy starts to improve.



No-one would know that until the father had begun his journey home, trusting enough in Jesus' words to leave rather than to continue to beg his attendance. Imagine the official's relief, the next day, meeting those bringing news. This good news he truly recognises. It leads him in to a deeper insight about Jesus. That father no longer just believes in Jesus' words. He now truly believes in Jesus himself – the living Word.

We may feel that we would like to see a few of those signs ourselves. We may wonder why those we pray for so hard do not recover.

We admit that we do not have all the answers and at times cry out to God for the precious children we desperately want to see saved. If that is where we are, that is fine – the psalms show us that lament is as valid a way to worship God. Yet through our lament, through bringing to God all the things that are wrong, we acknowledge that God understands our pain and is with us in it. New life will come, and in the meantime, God walks alongside us and holds our hand. Like the official, we walk the road in hope.

Are we reluctant to cry out to God today?

### **Prayer**

Lord of life,  
who heals with a word,  
we cry out to you today.  
So much seems broken,  
so many are overwhelmed  
so many sick and dying.  
Bring healing we pray  
and an awareness of your presence with us  
through your life-giving Spirit.  
Amen

### **Activity**

*We all know people who are in need of healing at the moment; many with desperate loved ones. Light a candle and bring to God all who are ill. Perhaps write their names down as we bring them to the living Word.*

## Day 9 Friday: Healing on the Sabbath

*“Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’”*

*Read John 5: 1-18*

Jesus travels to Jerusalem and the healing of a man has unexpected consequences. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

Thirty-eight years. The man had been ill for thirty-eight years. That seems a long time for us, but for the people of the time, that was around the average lifespan. He had endured the limitations of his illness for a generation. In an instant, Jesus recognised for how long that poor man had been suffering. I don't think many of us can come close to grasping the life changing events for that child of God when Jesus healed him.

This healing should have been a matter for great joy. It should have demonstrated that someone of God walked amongst the people. Jesus should then have been sought out as someone to listen and learn from. Yet, some around saw nothing but a breach of the Sabbath rules.

God's power isn't limited to days or events. God is. The pattern of work and rest was set up for humanity. The man's illness hadn't taken a day off, but the man had believed that the only time he could come to God to be healed was limited to when the water moved. That was his 'sin' and it was definitely not the reason for the illness that crippled him. A whole lifetime of waiting, limited to that mat or a too slow stagger to the pool.

The people around thought that the healing was an act of work and denounced it for happening on God's day of rest. They, unfortunately, just couldn't see it as a miracle from God; was that their sin? It was an act of great mercy, and love; all things that are more than just work and what the Sabbath was made for. Look how the act gave respite to the man and glory to God.



What do Sabbath and Sabbath rest mean to us? Do we ever limit when we turn to God?

### **Additional Reading**

**John 5: 19-47**

## Prayer

God of the Sabbath,  
sometimes we cannot see clearly where you are at work in the world.  
Too often we do not find the time, or have the energy to stop and look around  
to see you with us.  
Grant us the form of rest we need and show us your love.  
Amen

## Activity

*On a piece of paper, on one side write down everything that the man's mat might have represented about his limited life. On the other side, write down any ways you feel limited at the moment; or ways we might limit God in our lives.  
Roll up the paper, just as the man rolled up his mat. Offer it to God; perhaps by placing it by a candle, cross or in a Bible, or under your Jesus Tree.*

## Day 10 Saturday: Loaves and Fish

***“Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat.’”***

*Read John 6:1-15*

We approach Passover and wherever he goes, Jesus is followed by a crowd intrigued by his actions.

As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### For Reflection

John's Gospel doesn't have an account of the last supper. It is this feeding of the five thousand, close to Passover, which forms the base for thinking about Holy Communion in this Gospel.

We will be looking at this in more detail in the coming days, so today we spend some time with this story of another of Jesus' signs.

Find a comfortable place to sit and spend some time with the story. Read through the story again, slowly, trying to enter into it imaginatively. Perhaps you are one of the crowd, perhaps you are one of the disciples or maybe you are the boy offering his packed lunch? Think about the journey, the grassy spot with Jesus. From your perspective, how do you feel about that meal you are given?



Sometimes we believe we have little to offer God. Yet look what God could do with a boy's offering of five loaves and two fish, given willingly. Jesus' disciples had seen him do wonders as they had travelled with him. Phillip despaired of feeding everyone because of the cost; he did not have the resources needed and didn't know where to get them. Andrew did bring what was available, which to him seemed a drop in the ocean. It was enough.

Can we bring what we have, no matter how big or small it is, to God today and ask for it to be used for God's glory and the good of others?

### **Prayer**

Loving Lord, you take what we can offer and use it to build your kingdom.

Yet too often we feel that we have nothing good enough to bring.

Help us to see, Lord, that whatever we freely offer is a joy to you.

We pray for all struggling to feed themselves and their families  
and for the work of charities and foodbanks.

Amen

### **Activity**

*Take a piece of bread, or food of your choice and hold it in your hands. Thank God for the food in your cupboards and pray for those who have little or nothing. Eat the bread slowly, relishing the texture and taste of this life-giving food.*

*Is there a way you can share what you have to help feed others?*

## **Day 11 Monday: Walking on water**

***"It is I; do not be afraid."***

*Read John 6: 16-21*

Our story continues with a boat trip. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

I'm not exactly an expert rower. I can get from point A to point B as long as it's not too far, preferably on a flat calm lake about 3 feet deep. This story of being in the middle of a lake, fighting against the wind and the waves in the dark seems enough to terrify. Yet in this version, it is Jesus' walking on the water, not the weather, that the disciples find truly frightening. Here, on the water, they come face to face with God. "It is I" can also be translated as "I AM" a phrase that resonates throughout this



Gospel and one that takes us back to Moses and the burning bush, where God spoke those words. It isn't one of Jesus' signs that point to God. This is God, who controls the very essence of nature and the physical world, calling out to the disciples not to be afraid. At his word, their journey comes to a sudden end, with their arrival in the safe harbour of Capernaum. In the dark and chaos, Jesus came and brought safety, not just for the disciples, but for all of us. This is a passage that is often used for reflection. Some of us may be facing difficult times; in the dark with the wind howling. We may find it helpful to spend some time with the images the story brings, imagining Jesus saying to us, directly:

*"It is I; do not be afraid."*

Where do we feel we are today?

### **Prayer**

Lord of all creation,  
the great "I AM"  
reach out to those of us  
who feel overwhelmed  
by the storms of life  
and in the turmoil let us hear  
your voice saying  
"Do not be afraid."  
Be with all struggling  
in mind, body and spirit today.  
Amen

### **Activity**

*Our most common encounter with water is washing our hands; an act that helps to keep us safe. The next time we wash our hands why don't we try bringing to God all the things that are concerning us, knowing that God doesn't want us to stay afraid.*

## **Day 12 Tuesday: Bread of life**

***Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."***

*Read John 6:22 – 40*

The people are still entranced by the man who fed them. They, too, cross the water to Capernaum to seek out Jesus.

As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

## For Reflection

John's gospel talks of such physical things. "Are you hungry? Are you thirsty?" All part of human life, but changed so we realise that there is more to life than supplying our physical needs. Here the crowds follow Jesus, intrigued to the extent that they cross the water to find him so he can once more fulfil those needs. Jesus points out that they are asking him for the wrong things. He can bring them so much more than physical food – he brings eternal life if they will only believe he comes from God, the source of all.

Jesus is moving on from the "I AM" he has used before to the "I am" statements. They reveal even more about who he is and the relationship between God, Jesus and ourselves.

*"I am the bread of life."*

Bread for the Jews was a staple food, as it is for many of us today. An essential element of the diet, hard to imagine life without. This bread of life, Jesus' sustaining presence, is freely given to all who believe. It is what we need in our spiritual lives, to strengthen us if we want to live the full life that God wishes for us.



In terms of our 'spiritual diet' are we asking God for the things we truly need? Do we know what those are, or do we need to ask Jesus to show us?

## Prayer

Living Lord, Bread of life  
help us know our need for you and  
to seek you each and every day.  
Strengthen us through your Spirit  
show us what we need to live and grow  
as your people  
and feed us spiritually  
with the bread of life.  
Amen

## Activity

*"I am the bread of life."*  
What does this mean for you today?  
Find a way to express this. This might  
be through music or art; many  
colouring pages are available online.  
You might draw a thought map, write  
a prayer, create a picture or a  
photograph, or perhaps even make  
some bread.

## Day 13 Wednesday: Living bread

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven."*

Read John 6:41-59

The people do not know what to make of Jesus' comments. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

## For Reflection

Firstly, let us remember that all those present at this discussion were Jews. There were Jews that believed in Jesus, Jews that didn't and Jews that weren't sure but wanted to know more. Before we group everyone together with a single label, remember the trouble that may come from that.



This message is full of difficult things for those listening to Jesus. It talks of a human that they know – some even know his family and may have seen Jesus growing up – calling God his father and asking them to eat his flesh and drink his blood. It all seemed far from appropriate, even offensive. Drinking blood goes against all they would have believed in.

We, from our perspective, can draw links to Holy Communion and to the stories we hear in Matthew, Mark and Luke about the last supper. What we call that special, sacramental, act will depend on our background. For all of us, we acknowledge that taking bread and wine together in this way, remembering all

Jesus did for us, is a significant, meaningful act. Over the last years, the opportunities to meet together for this purpose have been greatly limited or even non-existent. We may have found this incredibly difficult. There is something in considering how Jesus' words, which often bring us such comfort, initially did the opposite. Even amongst Christians, this meal we undertake together to bring us the life Jesus promised can be divisive. Who is welcome, who is not? God came down from heaven to unite us all as one body. Whilst not all Christians are able to share in one bread, we are still joined through the Spirit and through the Living Word that speaks to us via the Bible.

Can we bring to God the ways Holy Communion both unites and divides us?

## Prayer

Lord, we know that it is powerful  
to meet you in the bread and wine.  
Yet you are the living bread  
who comes to us in many ways.  
Come afresh to us today  
healing us, repairing brokenness,  
bringing new life. Amen

## Activity

*Are there words, images, music or prayers which help you to explore what Holy Communion means to you today? Perhaps find a way to express them?*

## Day 14 Thursday: Words of Eternal life

*Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

*Read John 6:60-71*

Even the disciples are finding Jesus' words difficult. They have a decision to make; to stay or to go? As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### For Reflection

More than any other gospel, John stresses the importance of the words Jesus says, especially in the 'I am' statements. Yet we also see the acts of Jesus described and some called signs – actions that point us to God.

Here we have the confused disciples saying the words are difficult, yet acknowledging the words bring something some cannot walk away from. These are life-giving words. Yet the actions Jesus undertakes also 'speak' to explain the words. The disciples were not making their decisions based on words alone but on all they observed and knew about the Living Word, Jesus. This was someone they had travelled with, had seen spending time with the outcast and gifting a couple with wine, healing and feeding others. They would have eaten the bread that God provided, tasted the flavours of the fish. It wasn't just words, but a whole sensory experience.

Whenever I read Simon Peter's words my mind starts to sing a worship song, "*You are the king of glory*". It's rather a habit of mine, recalling scripture through music. I also love the works of Mary Fleeson and Hannah Dunnett that incorporate words into art that feeds my eyes and soul. Words are important to us, not least because they can raise us up, or bring us down. So are all the other senses we have been blessed with, and God uses them just as much to encourage, teach and sustain us. It is important to explore and know the different ways our faith is nourished.

As we continue to follow Jesus, even when the teaching is hard, how are our other senses involved in helping us know that we can trust in Jesus? Let us ask God to show us.

### Prayer

Loving Lord, who came as one of us  
to bring eternal life to all,  
grant us your Spirit  
so we may know your presence  
amongst us guiding us  
through all our senses.  
Amen



### Activity

*Do you absorb things best by listening, reading, seeing or doing? How would you express the idea of Jesus having the words to eternal life? Think about the ways you like to learn new things and respond. Try to include something different in the way you pray today that feeds your preferred style.*

## Day 15 Friday: Come to me

*“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink”*

*Read John 7: 37 – 8: 1*

Jesus returns in secret to Jerusalem for one of the festivals, the feast of Tabernacles. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### For Reflection



Here the discussion of spiritual refreshment illustrated by food and drink continues; it is one of the important ideas of this Gospel because it points to Jesus as Messiah – just like the signs.

Yet, again, we see people divided and unsure about who Jesus really is and how they should respond. He certainly seemed to have impressed the Temple police, and Nicodemus, too, speaks up for him amongst those who would have Jesus arrested without trial.

Perhaps there is a resonance 2000 years later, as we also live in a time where more people question and doubt; not sure what, or who to believe. For us it can be challenging to talk about Jesus our saviour. To those who have never known church, the message may seem very strange and we have to admit that we haven't got all the answers. This may make us feel somewhat inadequate, unable to share the faith that means so much to us. We may then think that our faith is lacking in some way.

It has been said that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. We no longer need faith, because we have proof. It is easy to stop learning if you are truly certain about things. Whilst we may understand God's love and desire for us to live a full life, we can always learn more about the ways that love is at work in the world, and how we can respond to that love. Here we get the first indication of the role the Holy Spirit will play in the life of believers. There is the image of not only drinking from the water Jesus brings, but that life-giving water flowing out of the believer's heart too. Our faith is often demonstrated most effectively by the loving acts we do, guided by the Spirit, not just the words we say.

Do we need to ask for the Holy Spirit to refresh us today, so we might reach out in love to others?

### Additional reading

**John 7: 1 -36**

### Prayer

Loving Lord,  
who gave us the Holy Spirit  
to nourish and guide us  
be with us today  
and fill our hearts anew.  
May your Spirit within us  
flow out to show others  
that they, too, may come to you  
and drink their fill.  
Amen

### Activity

*Do you know the Spirit in you today as a small stream, a deep well, a bubbling spring or perhaps an overwhelming wave? Spend some time in prayer with water today; water a plant, find a picture or poem, or word, music or video of water. Psalm 42 has some useful water images.*

## Day 16 Saturday: The woman caught in adultery

*And Jesus said,*

*“Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”*

*Read John 8: 1-11*

A woman caught breaking the religious and social laws is brought before Jesus. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### For Reflection

Today’s story stands apart somewhat from the narrative we have been following; some versions of the gospel have placed it in later in the story. So, we will treat it as an interlude that teaches us more about Jesus.

That poor, poor woman. Caught in the act, dragged away by men, judged and condemned and used as a test of piety. I doubt that she was treated gently. Imagine being surrounded by people all baying for your blood; it must have been completely terrifying. Whatever the sin, did she really deserve that? Is she even being treated like a human being here?

Jesus’ actions speak volumes here. He doesn’t answer, he doesn’t even seem to look at the frightened, deeply humiliated woman. Instead, he, the creator, writes in the dust from which we are all made. Don’t you wish we knew what he wrote? His actions distract from the woman, perhaps giving her some respite.

He makes no response until he is pushed to it and he looks at those who want him to judge the woman – but he cannot judge only the woman here. Those who have, in the name of God’s law, mistreated this woman are no less guilty than her. Only when those calling for justice realise this and leave does Jesus



talk to the woman; refusing to do what had been asked of him - to condemn her. Jesus is not afraid to be seen with her, despite the accusations. Instead, he speaks to her as an equal, offering forgiveness and the chance for a new start.

We are all guilty of judging far too harshly; judging others, who do not fit our 'rules' of life, judging ourselves when we feel we have fallen short.

We may not pick up stones, but still our words and actions have the ability to harm greatly, just as in this story. Yet, despite our imperfections, we can still come face to face with Jesus and be forgiven.

Today, let us ask God to show us where we judge others and ourselves, and ask for forgiveness and healing.

### **Prayer**

Lord of love and compassion,  
we are too quick to judge others  
Lord have mercy.  
we speak and act without thought  
Christ have mercy  
we condemn when you would have us  
show love.  
Lord have mercy  
Forgive us and heal us. Amen

### **Activity**

*Find a pebble or a stone to hold in your hands. Feel the roughness and weight and think about the pain that comes from judgemental behaviour. Bring your concerns to God, then leave the stone next to your candle or cross, handing them over to Christ, our saviour.*

## **Day 17 Monday: Light of the world**

***"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."***

*Read John 8: 12-20.*

Here we come to another I AM statement, picking up on one of the themes of John's Gospel.

As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

I wonder if many of you have experienced a solar eclipse? When I saw an eclipse in Devon, years ago now, it was somewhat surreal to see the cloudy daytime sky darken and the streetlights switching on. As the darkness increased, to night-time intensity, flashes were visible on the headland some distance away. They were tiny pinpoints of light, from camera flashes, as people tried to capture that moment. In the dark, the smallest light travels huge distances and can be seen, just as glimmers of hope shine even in the darkness of despair.



Here Jesus utters a profound truth and is met by resistance, again. This time it is all about legal witness; Jesus, they said, did not have the authority to say what he is saying. It is all about technicalities, not spirituality.

For us, the concept of the light of the world cannot be legally described or limited, just expressed in the person of Jesus. We may wonder how lost in spiritual darkness these people were, to be unable to see the bright light of Jesus right in front of them. Yet, if we are honest, don't we, too, sometimes get lost in cloudy darkness and miss the signs in front of us?

The good news is Jesus, our beacon of hope, always will shine for this world and each of us. We also have our role to play. In order to see anything, we have something has to either be a light source, like our sun, or reflect light, like the moon does. Not only do we need to seek out the light of Jesus, but we have the privilege of reflecting it to others, each of us a small spark like those glimmers on the headland, lighting up the darkened world.

Are we feeling lost in the dark in search of a glimmer of light, or is our own reflected light shining bright today?

### Additional reading

**John 8: 21-59**

#### Prayer

Jesus, Light of the world,  
you came to show us  
the way to eternal life.  
Guide our footsteps  
even in the darkest night.  
Help us to reflect  
your life and light to all. Amen

#### Activity

*"I am the light of the world."  
Light a candle with these words.  
What do they mean for you today?  
Find a way to express this, through  
music or art, words or craft. You  
might like to listen to Bernadette  
Farrell's song "Christ be our light" or  
spend some time with Holman  
Hunt's image "The light of the  
World".*

## Day 18 Tuesday: the man born blind

*“If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”*

*Read John 9*

A longer Bible passage today, but it helps to read the whole of this blind man's experience with Jesus.

As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### **For Reflection**

As someone with a scientific background, it is inconceivable to me to think that sin causes illness. Our bodies are complex, beautiful biological machines - true wonders - but sometimes they break, or are just made differently to start with.

Jesus stresses here that it was no-one's fault that this man was born blind, no one is to blame.

This gospel has been described as a 'court case' laying out the case for Jesus; this one story encapsulates this. The healing of the blind man story allows John to weave throughout it his themes of light and dark, acceptance and denial. Yesterday we thought about those glimmers of light in the dark. Here we see that even if we are in total darkness, unable to see God, Jesus can still see us, draw close to us, and heal us, leading us into understanding and love. Mud and spit may seem rather unhygienic method of healing today, but think of the symbolism. The dust of the earth infused with the water of life from the Word, smeared by God's own hand on the eyes, bringing healing and new life.

The man, who up until now was completely blind and therefore deemed useless (forced to beg as the only way to survive) now seems to have deeper insights than the people who had watched Jesus closely. Those who claim to be looking out for a Messiah treat this man horribly; accusing him, dismissing his words, finally driving him away. Just as in the story of the adulterous women, after all this has happened, Jesus seeks out this man to talk to him, once more as an equal. Can you imagine coming face to face for the first time with the person who had changed your life? It seems that the joy of sight was enough to compensate for all he went through at the hands of those who questioned Jesus. It really did bring a new life for him, so many new sights to see and new opportunities to explore. So, he simply responded by worshipping Jesus, as those who saw and heard Jesus, but denied, him asked *“Surely we are not blind, are we?”*

This story has humbling and disturbing elements to it. We may well want to identify with the formerly blind man, seeing Jesus and worshipping him, recognising the God-given gift he has bestowed. It is much harder to accept that at times we may actually be unwilling to see or accept God's work in others, or even ourselves.



Today has been all about how we respond to God's words and acts; can we see what God is trying to show us? How do we want to respond today?

### Prayer

Lord, we ask forgiveness  
for the times when we have  
failed to see your goodness;  
blinded by other concerns,  
judgemental and condemning differences,  
or afraid to change our world view.  
Be with all those who suffer  
from prejudice because  
they are perceived as different.  
Help us to see your beauty in all people  
and all things  
and to be ready to worship you for them.  
Amen

### Activity

*Spend some time outdoors or looking out of the window; what can you see in the everyday world that is wondrous and beautiful? Ask God to help you see beauty and God's hand at work in all around. Give thanks to God for that you can see.*

## Day 19 Wednesday: The good shepherd

***"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"***

*Read John 10: 1-21*

Today we have one of the lasting images of Jesus as the good shepherd. As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

### For Reflection



The first hymn I ever learned to play on the piano when I was a little girl was "Loving Shepherd of thy sheep" (written by Jane E. Leeson, 1809-81), which is based partly on this passage. Even then, there was something wonderful about the mental picture of protection it brought me. I loved to sing this song, trusting that I was safe and secure with God; looked after, known and loved. I hope others remember similar feelings of protection. Finding that safe, secure place may seem harder now than the hymn, or childhood, suggests.

Can we follow Jesus' voice, leading us, to safety, because we recognise it?

Voices are powerful things. Heard even in the womb, we learn to recognise and respond to the voices of those we love. We read into their tone and pitch, as well as listening to the words spoken. When we

know someone really well, we may be able to guess what they would say in certain situations and we understand the often-unsaid elements of love and care, in their words. We now have more ways than ever to see and hear each other and those around us. At times the world may seem a noisy place for us; different voices clamouring for attention. It may be easy to overlook one of the voices of love speaking to us, yet this is the most important voice of all. One of our aims in Lent is to pause and try and hear the voice of the “Good Shepherd” more clearly, through prayer, reflection and through fresh encounters with the Word in the Gospel. Jesus gives us not one, but two of the “I Am” statements here. Jesus invites us to enter into a place of safe rest, in his words, “*I am the gate for the sheep*”. Enter, stay with the good shepherd and learn to hear and follow his voice anew.

*“Loving shepherd, ever near,  
teach thy lamb thy voice to hear;”*

Do we feel we are resting in safe pastures, listening to the Shepherd, or in wild and frightening places unable to hear that voice? Wherever we are, let us try to listen for the Spirit’s call.

### **Prayer**

Today’s prayer is three of the verses from the hymn by Jane E. Leeson.

Loving Shepherd of thy sheep,  
Keep thy lamb, in safety keep,  
nothing can thy power withstand,  
none can pluck me from thy hand.

Loving Saviour, thou didst give  
thine own life that we might live  
and the hands outstretched to bless  
bear the cruel nails’ impress.

Loving Shepherd, ever near,  
teach thy lamb thy voice to hear  
suffer not my steps to stray  
from the straight and narrow way.

### **Activity**

*“I am the Good Shepherd”  
Is this a helpful way to think about  
God? Find a poem, a hymn or piece  
of music, a picture, image or object  
that helps you to feel safe with God  
and helps you to listen for God.*

## **Day 20 Thursday: Jesus’ Sheep?**

*“My sheep hear my voice.”*

Read John 10: 22-42

Jesus repeats his words, and trouble ensues.

As we read the verses, what stands out, what thoughts come to mind?

## For Reflection

Yesterday's reading brought comforting images to mind. As is so often the case in John's gospel, however, images that are familiar and comforting to us were anything but to some of the people around.

We know from Psalm 23 that God was viewed as the shepherd of the people and there are many other examples. Ezekiel 34 speaks of God becoming the true shepherd of the people after they had been abandoned by those who should have cared for them.

*"For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out"*

(Ezekiel 34: 11)

So, the language Jesus was using had great meaning to the people. Was this the Messiah? Again, we have the question asked; the question this whole gospel is trying to answer. Once more some said, "Yes". They had heard Jesus speak, seen him doing the Father's work and inspired by this (and the Spirit) they had faith. They did, indeed hear the shepherd's voice. Some, however, could not get past the fact that a human was saying those words – claiming a title that belonged to God. Imagine the scene.

*"Blasphemy! And in the Temple itself! Trying to make yourself God are you, when you are nothing more than the son of a carpenter from Galilee!"*

Jesus was not what they expected from the Messiah; so, some thought stoning him was the answer. How immensely tragic that they could not all recognise the one who God had promised stood there, among them, himself one with the God they were so eager to defend with violence.

Division and disagreements so often happen when we refuse to listen to others with a different viewpoint. It is easy to feel vulnerable, or even attacked, when someone questions our ways or anything dear to our hearts. It can feel as if we are losing control so we may lash out, in an attempt to regain it. Listening honestly and openly can be very hard. Yet this is what we are called to do.

With the command to listen to Jesus' voice comes more; we need to walk in his ways. He listened to, and talked to everyone, even those who fervently disagreed with him. Jesus wants all to become his sheep, but he still loves and listens to those who choose, at this moment, to walk away. As his sheep, we follow his call to hear all people.

Perhaps today we can ask God for insight into the times when we have not listened to others. Bring all the things that make the conversation difficult to God and ask to see those involved through the eyes of God's love.



## **Prayer**

Loving Lord

help us to hear to your voice  
especially when it calls us to listen  
to those who disconcert and challenge us.  
Help us understand ourselves better;  
enable us to put aside our fear  
and trust in you,  
so we may disagree well with others  
and still show care and concern for them  
knowing that they are also loved by you.  
Amen

## **Activity**

*Draw and cut out a cross shape large enough to write inside. Think of a time when no-one listened to you; can you remember how that felt? Write a word, phrase or prayer on the cross. Turn the cross over and think of a time when you regret not listening to another. Write down something that expresses to God your regrets, knowing you are forgiven. Where is the best private place to put this cross to remind you of the importance of listening?*

I hope you have enjoyed the first half of your Lenten journey. Part 2 of the Jesus Tree journey is available from your church.